Refiguring Prose Style

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I remember the day in college when my advanced writing teacher introduced the class to “resumptive modifiers,” a term culled from Joseph M. Williams’s *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (2002, 196). Besides my introduction to the dash—which quickly became my favorite form of punctuation—I remember no lesson so clearly. I loved the way a resumptive modifier, which repeats a key word or phrase, could help me lengthen a sentence, the way it moved the sentence forward with such, well, clarity and grace.

I quickly found, though, that not all of my teachers had been introduced to the resumptive modifier—and not all of them liked it once they were introduced. I remember the little red circles around repeated words and no further explanation; the circles spoke for themselves: repetition equals redundancy.

Often, writing teachers try to move students away from repetition and toward concision, asking them to state their claims as succinctly as possible, seeing repetition as unnecessary, as wordy, as lacking variety. While concision is, indeed, an important element of powerful prose, so is repetition—repetition of sound, of image, and of phrase.

Teaching college writing classes myself a decade after my introduction to various forms of repetition, I learned that I couldn’t simply tell students to pay attention to sentence rhythm or that repetition is okay. Early in my teaching career, I read passages from published essays aloud, praising the attention to rhythm. I did this naïvely until a student handed in a draft of an essay in which every two sentences rhymed. The essay itself was greeting-card shallow, forced, short on specifics and depth, but the student had worked hard on “rhythm” and was loathe to change anything since it would ruin his prose couplets. His failed experiment was my failure as a teacher. It forced me to think hard about what I meant by sentence rhythm, about how it’s achieved. His experiment forced me to look more
carefully at the passages I praised, to understand how and why those passages worked when the rhyming couplets did not.

As with other elements of style, students need to be taught to recognize uses of repetition in published writing, to analyze their effects, and to understand when and how repetition can be used in their own writing. In order to use it effectively, students must be introduced to traditional rhetorical schemes of repetition, those associated with both poetry and prose—repetition of sounds (alliteration, assonance, consonance, and even rhyme), repetition of single words in a particular order, and repetition of groups of words. In addition, students should understand the formal importance of other kinds of repetition—such as the repetition of key images and ways of marrying style and content. The work of contemporary nonfiction writers, essays often taught in composition courses, provides a rich source of examples for analyzing the effects of differing schemes and how such schemes reinforce the meaning or theme of particular texts.

Echoing Williams: The Cyclical Text

In her essay “Yellowstone: The Erotics of Place,” Terry Tempest Williams writes of echoes:

Echoes are real—not imaginary.
We call out—and the land calls back. It is our interaction with the ecosystem; the Echo System.
We understand it intellectually.
We respond to it emotionally—joyously.
When was the last time we played with Echo? (1994, 82)

Stylistically, Williams plays with Echo throughout her essay. In places, she repeats phrases and sentence structures; she also includes refrains. When discussing the ways the Greek god Pan played with the nymph Echo (and tying this mythology to her topic, Yellowstone), Williams uses word play, almost identical phrasings, and similar sentence structure in three successive paragraphs. She writes that “the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem/Echo System is a Pansexual landscape. Of Pan. A landscape that loves bison, bear, elk, deer” (83–84). After this initial alliteration (the b of bison and bear) and near rhyme (bear/deer), the list continues, including the names of twenty-one animals and birds.

In her next paragraph, Williams repeats a central phrase—“Pansexual. Of Pan”—and introduces another list: “A landscape that loves white pine,
limber pine, lodgepole” (84). Like the preceding list, this one continues, including the names of twenty trees and plants. As the short section I’ve quoted illustrates (with its repetition of l and p sounds), Williams makes use of alliteration again, echoing sounds. She opens her next paragraph with the refrain “Pansexual. Of Pan” and provides another list, this one of mountain and river names. Through refrain and sentence structure, Williams connects the lists, yet by categorizing her lists differently, she moves the essay forward.

Williams also moves the essay forward through a changing refrain. Three times in the essay, she uses a similar phrase, but one she changes slightly each time. Early in the essay, she writes, “We call its name—and the land calls back” (81). Later, the first part of the refrain changes: “We call out—and the land calls back” (82). And at the end of the essay, the first part changes again: “We call to the land—and the land calls back” (87). The subjects (“we” and “the land”), the verbs, and the sentence structure remain the same; this changing refrain is part of the “echo system” Williams creates in the entire piece.

In terms of structure, Williams begins and ends the piece with essentially the same paragraph, a paragraph made up of imagistic nouns followed by gerunds: “Steam rising. Water boiling. Geysers surging. Mud pots gurgling. Herds breathing. Hooves stampeding. Wings flocking. Sky darkening. Clouds gathering. Rain falling. Rivers raging” (81). By repeating the paragraph at the end of her essay, Williams makes her form echo her content, creating an intellectually and emotionally satisfying piece.

This strategy, creating a cyclical text, is one Williams uses often, bringing her readers full circle through powerful resonance. She opens her essay “Winter Solstice at the Moab Slough” with an echo of her title, saying she is spending winter solstice at the Moab Slough “as an act of faith, believing the sun has completed the southern end of its journey and is now contemplating its return toward light” (1994, 61). The essay is about hope, about a place of renewal, about daring to love. And it ends as it begins, with Williams standing at the slough: “I stand at the edge of these wetlands, a place of renewal, an oasis in the desert, as an act of faith, believing the sun has completed the southern end of its journey and is now contemplating its return toward light” (65). In the beginning of the essay, Williams sets her reflection in a particular time and place, announcing her presence at the slough on the shortest, darkest day of the year “as an act of faith.” In the end, she reaffirms her commitment to place as an act of faith, creating a text that follows the cyclical pattern of the year.
She’s able to have faith in the return toward light because it happens in the natural, yearly cycle. Likewise, she makes her use of repetition, of a cyclical form, seem natural.

**Definition and Contrast: Finding a Focus, Building an Argument**

In using a cyclical form for some of her essays, Williams achieves a kind of balance, a balance that in most essays is more common in smaller, syntactical units. Repetition through parallelism creates cohesion and balance. Particularly effective in texts that will be delivered orally, this kind of repetition helps reinforce the author/speaker’s point. Testifying before a subcommittee concerning the Pacific Yew Act of 1991, Williams told lawmakers: “It is not a story about us versus them. That is too easy. It is not a story to pit conservationists against cancer patients. That is too easy also. Nor is it a story about corporate greed against a free-market economy. It is a story about healing and how we might live with hope” (1991, 130). Here, Williams uses anaphora (repeating both “It is not a story” and “That is too easy”) as she defines her position and counters possible objections to that position, focusing and building an argument through repetition and contrasts.

Similarly, environmental writer David James Duncan uses parallel structure in the following two sentences, repeating the phrases that begin (anaphora) and end (epistrophe) each sentence to create balance and to reinforce his point: “The belief that one can safely pump thousands of gallons of water a minute, or safely spray thousands of gallons of cyanide, round the clock in sub-zero weather is not credible. The belief that one can create cyanide reservoirs, toxic heaps, and toxic mountains, line them with plastics that crack in the cold, and declare the adjacent river safe in perpetuity is not credible” (2001, 141). Duncan reinforces his concerns about safety and toxicity by repeating key words and phrases in a patterned way. Through this structure, he orders his argument, strengthening the force of his claims.

Like Williams, Duncan also uses repetition as a way of focusing and building his topic. He makes a claim—“I believe corporate transformation is the crucial (in)human topic of our time” (2001, 172)—and then shifts his focus, writing, “But it’s not my topic.” Duncan then devotes the rest of the paragraph to explaining what his topic will be:

My topic is the five-people-at-once whom Bob Pyle and I feel we have to be in order to earn a living while also decrying the havoc that corporate power is wreaking upon the butterflies and salmonids to which we’ve sworn our allegiance.
My topic is the hash that fleshless, bloodless “independent existences” are making of the contemplative and artistic lives of the fleshed and blooded. My topic is the grief and frenzy that daily invade every sincere human’s attempts to simply pursue a vocation that expresses gratitude and respect for life.

Anaphora allows Duncan to define and extend his topic, moving from the personal (the pressures he and another writer feel) to the more universal (pressures on all artists, even all sincere humans). The repetition allows Duncan to make this move in just three sentences.

In another essay, Duncan uses a similar pattern—making a claim and then creating a contrast through anaphora, showing why fishers do not need guides. He writes:

Fly fishing at its best is an unmediated, one-on-one music played by a body of flesh and blood upon a body of water: it is a satisfying duet, till a fish makes it an even more satisfying trio. The average guide renders duet and trio inaudible. The average guide is a Top Forty disc jockey who dictates the day’s music. The average guide mediates so relentlessly between you and your fishing that it feels as if you and the river are divorcing and trying to split up the property. The average guide plants an invisible ego-flag on every fish you catch, as if he were a mountaineer, the fish were a summit, and your stupidity were Mount Everest. (2001, 233–34)

Through a range of metaphors and similes, Duncan paints a humorous portrait of a controlling guide and unsuspecting fisher who pays for a disrupted experience. Duncan could have stopped with his second sentence, which extends the music metaphor and makes the corrective. He decides, however, to keep going, piling simile upon simile, increasing the comical effect. Through this use of anaphora and metaphor/simile, he makes “the average guide” and the person who might hire a guide seem ridiculous.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE, WHAT IT IS: REPEITION AND SIMILE

While Duncan allows his similes to pile up, Annie Dillard uses repetition and simile for a different purpose in her essay “Total Eclipse.” Through description, reflection, and her use of style, she shows that moments of awakening, powerful as they are, tend to be fleeting, and language can’t easily capture the power of such moments. Still, Dillard uses simile and repetition to capture what she can. She opens with a series of similes:

It had been like dying, that sliding down the mountain pass. It had been like the death of someone, irrational, that sliding down the mountain pass and into
the region of dread. It was like slipping into a fever, or falling down that hole in sleep from which you wake yourself whimpering. (1982, 9)

In this passage, Dillard uses anaphora to introduce her similes (repeating the phrase “It had been like”) and reinforces the comparison by repeating “that sliding down the mountain pass.” Her use of polyptoton, repeating words derived from the same root, creates further cohesion between the sentences and the images she presents; it is no mistake that Dillard uses “dying” and “death” in successive sentences or “slipping,” “sliding,” and “falling” in close proximity. The effect of this repetition reinforces a theme in the essay: the difficulty of finding the right words to describe particular experiences. Each phrase, each sentence in this quotation, seems to build on the one preceding it as she tries to create a more specific word picture of her experience through simile.

Through simile, Dillard also creates subtle connections among those gathered to view the eclipse. Describing the crowd, she writes, “All of us rugged individualists were wearing knit caps and blue nylon parkas” (13). She then emphasizes the irony of a bunch of “rugged individualists” dressed exactly alike, including the color and material of their parkas, through anaphora and a series of similes:

It looked as though we had all gathered on hilltops to pray for the world on its last day. It looked as though we had all crawled out of spaceships and were preparing to assault the valley below. It looked as though we were scattered on hilltops at dawn to sacrifice virgins, make rain, set stone stelae in a ring. (14)

This group, ordinary people in blue parkas, gathered for an extraordinary event, could have been from another time, another culture; this group could even be aliens.

Later in the essay, the difficulty of finding the right words is evident again as Dillard describes the eclipse using metaphors: “In the sky was something that should not be there. In the black sky was a ring of light. It was a thin ring, an old, thin silver wedding band, an old, worn ring. It was an old wedding band in the sky, or a morsel of bone” (18). Through repetition and the articulation of these metaphors, Dillard expands the reader’s knowledge of what the eclipse was like without providing a set picture. Like a Polaroid developing before the reader’s eyes, the picture grows more clear yet remains incomplete. In the first sentence I’ve quoted, we don’t know what is in the sky, just that it “should not be there.” In the second sentence, we learn that the sky is black and that what should
not be there is a “ring of light.” Each of the next two sentences provides a little more information. In just four sentences, “sky,” “ring,” and “old” are each repeated three times; “wedding band” and “thin” are each repeated twice, but we’re not left with a clear image of an old, silver wedding band; it could have been more like “a morsel of bone.”

Dillard’s attempts at simile and metaphor seem to fail her; she can’t find the right words to describe the eclipse until she overhears a college student describing the sight: “Did you see that little white ring? It looked like a Life Saver. It looked like a Life Saver up in the sky” (23). In considering his simile, Dillard agrees: “And so it did. The boy spoke well. . . . I myself had at that time no access to such a word. He could write a sentence, and I could not.” Through her own sentences—her many attempts to describe the eclipse—Dillard shows the importance of finding the right words. She argues that all “those things for which we have no words are lost” (24), yet she finds the experience again through finding a fitting expression in words.

THE COLOR OF PASSION, SHADES OF EMOTION

In Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student, Edward Corbett and Robert Connors argue that anaphora is always deliberate and “usually reserved for those passages where the author wants to produce a strong emotional effect” (2000, 391). David James Duncan uses anaphora and other rhetorical schemes in just this way—often writing about his own emotions in a way that enhances the emotional effect of his prose. He writes, for example, with considerable passion about a grebe:

I am haunted by a grebe. A grebe encountered, in the mid-1980s, at the height of the Reagan-Watt-Crowell-Bush-Luhan-Hodell-Hatfield-Packwood rape and pillage of my homeland, the Oregon Cascades and coast range; height of the destruction of the world I had grown up in and loved and given my writing life to; height of an eight-year spate of Pacific Northwest deforestation that outpaced the rate in Brazil; height of the war on rivers, birds, wildlife, small towns, biological diversity, tolerance, mercy, beauty; height of my personal rage; depth of my despair; height of my need for light. (2001, 40)

It’s not just the repetition that conveys emotion in this passage. Duncan uses several emotion-laden words: “haunted,” “rape,” “pillage,” “destruction,” “war,” “rage,” “despair.” The many repetitions he uses, though, create cohesion and enhance the emotional effect. Early in the quotation, he uses anadiplosis, repetition of “a grebe” in the final part of
the first sentence and at the beginning of the following clause. This use of repetition is similar to Joseph Williams’s resumptive modifier, though such modifiers usually occur in the same sentence. Duncan’s repetition of “a grebe,” however, functions as a resumptive modifier, creating cohesion and allowing readers to pause before taking in his lengthy list.

Another form of repetition evident in this quotation is rhyme, the repetition of the stressed vowel sound and the sound that follows the vowel: he uses “eight,” “spate,” and “rate” in one clause and “height” and “light” in another. Although rhyme is more often a feature of poetry, when done well and sparingly, it can also be an effective element of prose.

The most obvious repetition, though, in this quotation is anaphora; “height” is repeated six times at the beginning of successive clauses, creating a rhythm that is interrupted only once by “depth.” Through that repetition, Duncan guides the reader, emphasizing the height and depth of his feelings not only for the grebe but also about the environmental destruction he’s witnessed.

In a later passage, he links the grebe and his feelings again through anaphora: “just shy of the first dune—its eyes as red as fury, as red as my feelings, as red as the fast sinking sun—sat a solitary male western grebe” (2001, 42). This series of similes describes not only the color of the grebe’s eyes but also the rage-red “color” of Duncan’s emotions. Following this quotation, Duncan uses the same strategy, a list set off as an appositive, for a similar purpose, writing: “But—sick of humans, sick of my own impotence, sick with the knowledge of how much had been destroyed—I gazed out at the grebe through my sickness” (42). In this use of anaphora, Duncan emphasizes his emotion, a feeling stressed by the inclusion of “sickness” at the end of the sentence.

Though he often writes of rage, sickness, and loss, Duncan also uses repetition to highlight another powerful emotion—love. In discussing a gift he once gave to his then future wife, Adrian, Duncan lists several reasons why he loved giving her a clay bowl he formed and fired for her:

I loved giving her a bowl because bowls are beautiful but also as humble, utilitarian, handmade, and breakable as a marriage. I loved giving her a bowl because now both of us, our two daughters, and even our dog eat out of it, as if out of the marriage. I loved giving her a bowl because my mind seems at times about the size of a bowl, if not smaller. I loved giving her a bowl because, once you’ve wandered your house looking for reading glasses or car keys only to find the latter in your pocket, or even in your hand, the former atop your
head, or even on your nose, you can’t help but wonder in what sense they’re “your” glasses or keys even after you find them—which in turn makes you wonder whether it’s really “your” house, “your” life, “your” marriage, and whether even you are “yours.” I loved giving Adrian a bowl because my life, home, marriage, and self are gifts I must beg daily—must place in the moment as if in a bowl, and bend down over as if over a mound of begged rice—lest I forget to consider them, forget to be grateful for them, and so lose them, though they rest on my very head, in my hand, on my nose. (74–75)

In this passage, Duncan uses some variation of the phrase “I loved giving her a bowl” (once modifying the phrase to include his wife’s name) five times; he uses “bowl” or “bowls” eight times, creating satisfying coherence rather than annoying redundancy. “I loved giving her a bowl” becomes a refrain in this poetic passage. Through metaphor, simile, and repetition, Duncan develops the bowl as a symbol of marriage.

Other repetitions—the repetition of “your” and the repeated suggestion of places you might “lose” glasses or keys—allow Duncan to reflect on the related concepts of ownership and gifts, especially as they relate to marriage. In the quotation, Duncan reveals his passion for the bowl, for his marriage, for gifts and giving through repeating these interconnected words, images, concepts, and symbols. His writing shows that no matter what shade or color a writer’s passions and emotions are, various forms of repetition can help convey those feelings.

**PLAYING WITH ECHO IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM**

One way to introduce students to rhetorical schemes of repetition is to point to such schemes and how they function in the texts you’re reading for class (as I’ve done in this essay with texts I often teach). If the books or essays your class is reading do not include effective examples, presidential State of the Union addresses always include multiple forms of repetition and so provide a fruitful starting place. Spending time on stylistic analysis in class allows students to move beyond summary (what a text says) and to consider how a writer does what he or she does. Without reinforcement and practice, though, students likely won’t remember the terms nor will they learn how to incorporate effective uses of repetition in their own writing.

To reinforce what they see in published sources, I often put students in small groups and provide them with a list of rhetorical schemes of repetition and their definitions (such lists are available in Corbett and
Connors’s *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* [2000] and Richard A. Lanham’s *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* [1991]) as well as passages that illustrate several forms of repetition. I ask groups to identify the kinds of repetition and their effects. I’ve used, for example, the following passage from Duncan’s *My Story as Told by Water*:

I fell into a daze, kept fishing, kept catching and releasing big, gasping browns. Every trout I touched was an emissary of death—river death; food-chain death; our death. Yet every trout I touched filled me with weird bursts of empathy for a man who’d abandoned my father at age four. (2001, 132)

Many students recognize how in “kept fishing, kept catching and releasing,” the repetition of “kept” (anaphora) signals the repetitive physical action Duncan describes. Others recognize, in the repetition of “death,” Duncan’s use of epistrophe (or what Richard Lanham terms “antistrophe” [190]) and also a climatic order, through which he suggests that death of the river, by affecting the food chain, is related to the death of humans. And through further analysis, students understand that Duncan’s repetition of the phrase “every trout I touched” reveals a contrast. In the midst of death, he highlights hope: “every trout [he] touched” was both “an emissary of death” and a source of empathy.

Though I’ve included just one example for illustrative purposes, in a classroom setting, it’s helpful to provide many examples, for in being offered several passages from different writers, students can also compare and contrast how different writers use repetition, recognizing both patterns and differing options.

To reinforce what they’ve done in class, I ask students to take their list of rhetorical schemes of repetition home with them and to go on a scavenger hunt, finding at least one example of each term. Such examples can become a basis for class discussion. In addition, copying examples from other sources—by hand or word processing—tends to help students internalize the rhythms used by other writers.

After they learn to recognize and understand effective uses of repetition, I encourage students to practice such schemes in their own prose (or poetry, depending on the course), using such strategies for a few important sentences or to structure an entire piece. In a course on the form of the essay, for example, we read Annie Dillard’s “Total Eclipse.” As an assignment, I asked students to begin one of their own essays by repeating a series of metaphors that describe something they’ve experienced,
just as Dillard does in the opening of her essay. Kate Finley, a poet and essayist, began a short essay about her baby sister this way:

In the little tub she is an impressionist painting. A bad impressionist painting—that we bought at a yard sale for $2.99. A splotchy painting—splotches of dark red and jaundice yellow and purple bruised black. A swollen canvas with smooth and rough strokes, and bumpy acne spots where dirt got caught in the brush’s bristles.

In the little tub she is a peach. A too ripened, bruised peach with hollowed soft spots threatening to rip, exposing liquidy flesh. Fuzzy. Fuzzy all over the imperfect roundness. The imperfect peach. Spoiling fruit in the center of the bowl.

Kate carries these metaphors and her powerful, fragmented, imagistic style throughout the essay, using alliteration, anadiplosis, polyptoton, anaphora, and other schemes of repetition throughout. Though based on an assignment that encouraged imitation, her work is quite original, showcasing her own voice and style.

Kate’s example is a good one: full of color, texture, sensory images. While not all initial attempts are as strong, most show potential, giving both teachers and students something to work on and with. In the midst of my own bumpy and spoiled attempts at using and teaching repetition, I’ve learned that through stylistic analysis and practice in their own writing, students can learn the ways repetition not only helps writers to create rhythm, cohesion, and coherence but also helps to reinforce theme and meaning. Further, students themselves can become writers who play with Echo, experimenting with form and creating opportunities for readers to understand intellectually even as they respond emotionally.